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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA IMMEDIATE 2149
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL IMMEDIATE 3187
RUEHFK/AMCONSUL FUKUOKA IMMEDIATE 1205
RUEHNH/AMCONSUL NAHA IMMEDIATE 3637
RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE IMMEDIATE 4768
RUEHKS/AMCONSUL SAPPORO IMMEDIATE 2084
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI IMMEDIATE 6437
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUALSFJ/COMUSJAPAN YOKOTA AB JA IMMEDIATE
RHMFISS/DISA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
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SUBJECT: MACHIMURA DISCUSSES U.S. TRIP, ELECTIONS, AND PM
ABE IN MAY 23 MEETING WITH DCM

Classified By: DCM JOE DONOVAN, REASONS 1.4(B),(D).

¶1. (C) Summary. Lower House Diet member and former Foreign Minister Machimura, in a May 23 conversation with the DCM, predicted that the ruling coalition would maintain its majority in the Upper House in the July elections, but only by a slim margin. He attributed PM Abe's rise in the polls to his demonstration of strong leadership through recent diplomatic and legislative successes. Machimura leaves for the United States on May 24, where he will meet with U.S. officials and accept an honorary degree from Wesleyan University. End Summary.

U.S. Visit

¶2. (C) In a meeting with the DCM at his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) faction office on May 23, Lower House Diet member Nobutaka Machimura confirmed that will depart for a one-week trip to the United States on May 24. In Washington, he is scheduled to meet with Deputy Secretary Negroponte, Deputy National Security Advisor Crouch, and Senator Daniel Inouye. On May 25, at 11:30 a.m., he will fly to New York for a meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, his counterpart when he was foreign minister in the Koizumi Cabinet. He will also attend a reception for Ban hosted jointly by Japan, China, and Korea. On May 27, Machimura will receive an honorary doctorate degree from Wesleyan University, where he spent his junior year in college.

Upper House Elections

¶3. (C) The LDP and coalition partner Komeito will maintain their majority in the House of Councilors in the July elections, Machimura predicted, but only by a very slim margin. Should the coalition miss the mark by just one or two seats, he noted, it might be possible to make up the difference by bringing in Tamisuke Watanuki's small Kokumin Shinto party, as long as they pledge to support the ruling party's postal privatization efforts. This scenario assumes no major missteps by Prime Minister Abe or the party over the next two months, he added, citing the example of former Prime Minister Hashimoto, who lost an election after reneging on

his promise that he would not consider raising the consumption tax. Machimura described voters as "very volatile" right now.

¶4. (C) His own faction, the largest in the LDP, has 10 candidates up for election in the electoral district races, and another seven running on the proportional party list, Machimura said. In the 10 electoral district races, only faction candidates in Chiba, Osaka, and Okinawa are considered vulnerable, he noted. He described the proportional list races as simply too difficult to forecast, especially since the new system for deciding proportional list seats has only been in place for the past two Upper House elections. In the 2004 race, each proportional list candidate needed to win approximately 150,000 votes to earn a seat. He expects that number to rise to as many as 200,000 votes per candidate this year. Machimura completely dismissed rumors of a double election, noting that the LDP would almost certainly lose seats in the Lower House.

PM Abe's Leadership

¶5. (C) Machimura credited the recent rise in Prime Minister Abe's cabinet support rate to his steady string of diplomatic successes and strong track record in the Diet. April summits with President Bush and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, and his swing through Middle Eastern capitals, have definitely helped to improve his image, Machimura asserted. Equally important, however, has been his ability to follow through on his promised legislative agenda, including the National Referendum Bill, the U.S. Forces Realignment Bill, and education-related legislation. In a sense, Machimura noted, voters are not really focused on the content of the

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legislation. They are just pleased to see the Prime Minister exercising leadership and effecting change.

Comment

¶6. (C) A visit to the offices of the Machimura Faction, housed in the historic old wing of the Akasaka Prince Hotel, is an eye-opening reminder that the LDP factions are alive and well, despite the best efforts of former Prime Minister Koizumi. Asked about his party's chances in the elections, Machimura immediately defaulted to the figures for his own faction, before turning to the overall numbers for the LDP as a whole. Meanwhile, dozens of Diet members, party staffers, and others lined the narrow hallways leading to Machimura's office throughout the 20 minutes that the DCM was in the building, and former Prime Minister and faction leader Yoshiro Mori walked out of Machimura's office just as we entered.

Bio Note

¶7. (SBU) Nobutaka Machimura, 63, succeeded Yoshiro Mori as the head of the Liberal Democratic Party's largest faction (89 members) in October 2006. He chairs the LDP Foreign Affairs Research Committee and a subcommittee of the Tax Committee, and sits on the International Terrorism and Election panels. He served as Minister of Education from 1997 to 1998, and as MEXT Minister from 2000 to 2001. He was Director General of the LDP's Election Bureau for two years, just prior to succeeding Yoriko Kawaguchi as Foreign Minister under PM Koizumi in 2004.

¶8. (C) Machimura is a perennial contender for the Prime Minister job, a reason cited by Mori when he named him faction head last year. He was not an early advocate for Abe's candidacy during the LDP presidential campaign in September 2006, however, and was not tapped for a senior post in the new administration. He has since become one of the Prime Minister's stronger defenders, leading some news reports to question whether he is positioning himself for the Chief Cabinet Secretary job in the event of a post-election

Cabinet reshuffle. Machimura conducted the meeting in
English.
SCHIEFFER